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(ATTENTION EDITORS This column ends with the words “Stay positive.” If the column you have received ends another way, you have an incomplete version. Please contact media@poetryfoundation.org for the correct version.)

GOING NEGATIVE

Why poetry reviews should be more skeptical.

By Jason Guriel

Two Men Fighting with a Knife, Story Line Press. \$14.95.

The negative review is a curiosity, unique to anxious enclaves like the poetry world. It’s not that people who review movies don’t say harsh things—they do. But when a book of poetry receives a tough verdict we often label the review “negative” and speculate about the reviewer’s motives, the agenda behind the takedown. Indeed, behind words like “negative” and “agenda” and “takedown” lurks the sense that the reviewer is the one making the trouble, and the book of poetry—whether it deserved a kicking or not—is being bullied.

Maybe poetry is so marginal, so fragile a commodity, we worry about kicking it when it’s already pretty clearly down. Whatever the reason for our anxiety, the negative review is often more of an event than it ought to be. But negativity, I’m starting to think, needs to be the poetry reviewer’s natural posture, the default position she assumes before scanning a single line. Because really, approaching every new book with an open mind is as well-meaning but ultimately exhausting as approaching every stranger on the street with open arms; you’ll meet some nice people, sure, but your charming generosity won’t be reciprocated most of the time. When braving any new book of poems—particularly by an author you’re not too familiar with—it’s best to brace yourself and expect the worst. This needn’t involve cynicism. Indeed, you probably shouldn’t be opening the book in the first place if you aren’t, on some deep level, already hoping for the best—that is, the discovery of a great poem. But hope should remain on that deep level, well-protected, until the shell that shields it is genuinely jarred.

If you’re frequently having the top of your head taken off—Emily Dickinson’s description of what authentic poetry does—I’m glad for you. But you’re reading better

books than I am. And Emily, too. After all, the gist of her metaphor, it seems, is that such head injuries are by definition exceptional.

John Poch's second collection contains the sort of poetry that confronts most reviewers most often: poetry that's not especially bad but not especially good either—poetry, in other words, that should be guarded against at all costs.

And yet: there are some fine moments in *Two Men Fighting with a Knife*, and if I have reservations with the bulk of the book—and I do—they aren't meant to mitigate my praise. The opening sonnet, "The Ghost Town," appeared in the *Paris Review* and probably deserved to, which surely can't be said of most poems composed in any given quarter:

It need not be a desiccated
wreck of boards, completely uninhabited,
adobe bricks regressed to mud, hay. Heck,
It might be verdant and jackrabbited.

The wind might not lament; the gift shop door
could jingle bells, the jasmine candles wafting.
Beyond some seniors at the convenience store,
you might observe a fisherman shoplifting.

But say it's vacant and bunch grass gray. Then torch
an image, scent, or song from your present life
to reconstruct the step, the stairs, the porch,
the house, town, two men fighting with a knife.

Much like the architecture of a sonnet:
a step, and suddenly you die upon it.

The robust alliteration ("hay. Heck") and chewy imagery ("bunch grass gray") offer instant pleasures, but the self-reflexive payoff—a risky move for a formal poem—succeeds in running the reader through on its final line.

Most of Poch's poems, though, aren't up to these standards. There are no out-and-out disasters; Poch's commitment to craft—to ensuring that his lines scan and rhyme—guarantees that the slightest of his works are always readable, even enjoyable (an advantage that mediocre formal verse has over mediocre free verse). However, it's this same commitment to craft, to satisfying a pre-imposed pattern, that can lead Poch's verse into subtle but costly contortions. The resulting limbo never falls on its face but nevertheless looks awkward, as demonstrated by the opening of "John Poch":

A smaller Jackson Pollock, my polar blues
in cursive curse and scratch. A wasted fire
to write myself lies scribbled, smolders. Moods

instead of house-high flames' emotion mire
a vision. Ink, they lie.

Frost's great innovation—a voice so natural you don't notice the iambs—remains much impersonated but, as Poch proves, rarely possessed. Poch simply doesn't make it look easy.

But finally, the real failing of *Two Men Fighting with a Knife*—a failing, to be fair, shared by most of the collections which smart, well-meaning editors, even now, are FedExing to their rosters of reviewers—is the lack of game-changing metaphors. Pan the verse of John Poch long enough and you'll uncover glints of gold like his description of a fork lying in “the shadow of a napkin's knee.” But in the absence of such brilliant images, Poch's clever quatrains are just that—clever:

Dear Doctor, don't get me wrong. I adore my wife,
but you looked inside me. Maybe it's the morphine
talking, but love abounds in the surgeon's knife.
Expect a card on February Fourteen.

Certainly Poch's subjects—desiccated Americana, the stepladder at the Strand Bookstore, spinal surgery—brim with potential, but his actual language—“I'm dead / yet want to open, close, and surprise / like a heart or sunset”—is business as usual.

“I sometimes think there is no good news about translation, ever,” wrote Michael Hofmann recently. I sometimes think there is no good news about poetry, ever. Or today, anyway. That's negative, maybe, but that's how I know poetry exists: when I'm least expecting it, when everything's dross, when I've given up hope and have my head down—that's when the real stuff, like so much low-hanging plumbing, clocks me. Or takes the top of my head off. Or whatever poetry does to us, those rare, rare times we run into it. Stay positive.

Jason Guriel's new collection of poems is *Pure Product* (Véhicule Press). He lives in Toronto. This article first appeared in *Poetry* magazine. Distributed by the Poetry Foundation at www.poetryfoundation.org.

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